

The Dialect of The Appalachian People

By Wylene P. Dial

The dialect spoken by Appalachian people has been given a variety of names, the majority of them somewhat less than complimentary. Educated people who look with disfavor on this particular form of speech are perfectly honest in their belief that something called The English Language, which they conceive of as a completed work—unchanging and fixed for all time—has been taken and, through ignorance, shamefully distorted by the mountain folk.

The fact is that this is completely untrue. The folk speech of Appalachia instead of being called corrupt ought to be classified as archaic. Many of the expressions heard throughout the region today can be found in the centuries-old works of some of the greatest English authors: Alfred, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the men who contributed to the King James version of the Bible, to cite but a few.

Most editors who work with older materials have long assumed the role of officious busy bodies: never so happy, apparently, as when engaged in tidying up spelling, modernizing grammar, and generally rendering whatever was written by various Britons in ages past into a colorless conformity with today's Standard English.

To this single characteristic of the editorial mind must be ascribed the almost total lack of knowledge on the part of most Americans that the language they speak was ever any different than it is right now. How many people know, for example, that when the poet Gray composed his famous "Elegy" his title for it was "An Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard?"

Southern mountain dialect (as the folk speech of Appalachia is called by linguists) is certainly archaic, but the general historical period it represents can be narrowed down to the days of the first Queen Elizabeth, and can be further particularized by saying that what is heard today is actually a sort of Scottish-flavored Elizabethan English. This is not to say that Chaucerian forms will not be heard in everyday use, and even an occasional Anglo-Saxon one as well.

When we remember that the first white settlers in what is today Appalachia were the so-called Scotch-Irish along with some Palatine Germans, there is small wonder that the language has a Scottish tinge; the remarkable thing is that the Germans seem to have influenced it so little. About the only locally used dialect word that can be ascribed to them is *briggity*. The Scots appear to have had it all their own way.

When I first came to Lincoln County as a bride it used to seem to me that everything that did not *pooch out*, *hooved up*, *Pooch* is a

Scottish variant of the word *pouch* and was in use in the 1600's. Numerous objects can *pooch* out including pregnant women and gentlemen with "bay windows." *Hoove* is a very old past participle of the verb *to heave* and was apparently in use on both sides of the border by 1601. The top of an old-fashioned trunk may be said to *hoove* up. Another word heard occasionally in the back country is *ingerns*. *Ingerns* are *onions*. In Scottish dialect the word is *inguns*; however, if our people are permitted the intrusive *r* in *potaters*, *tomaters*, *tobaccer*, and so on, there seems to be no reason why they should not use it in *ingerns* as well.

It is possible to compile a very long list of these Scots words and phrases. I will give only a few more illustrations, and will wait to mention some points on Scottish pronunciation and grammar a little further on.

Fornenst is a word that has many variants. It can mean either "next to" or "opposite from." "Look at that big rattler quiled up *fornenst* the fence post!"

(*Quiled* is an Elizabethan pronunciation of *coiled*.) "When I woke up this morning there was a little *skift* of snow on the ground." "I was getting better, but now I've took a *backset* with this flu." "He dropped the dish and busted it all to *flinders*." "Law, I hope *how soon* we get some rain!" (*How soon* is supposed to be obsolete, but it enjoys excellent health in Lincoln County.) "That trifling old *fixin* ain't worth a *haet*!" *Haet* means the smallest thing that can be conceived of, and comes from *Deil hae't* (Devil have it.) *Fixin* is the Old English or Anglo-Saxon word for *she-fox* as used in the northern dialect. In the south of England you would have heard *vixen*, the word used today in Standard English.

It is interesting to note that it has been primarily the linguistic historians who have pointed out the predominately Scottish heritage of the Southern mountain people. Perhaps I may be allowed to digress for a moment to trace these people back to their beginnings.

Early in his English reign, James I decided to try to control the Irish by putting a Protestant population into Ireland. To do this he confiscated the lands of the earls of Ulster and bestowed them upon Scottish and English lords on the condition that they settle the territory with tenants from Scotland and England. This was known as the "Great Settlement" or the "King's Plantation," and was begun in 1610.

Most of the Scots who moved into Ulster came from the lowlands¹ and thus they would have spoken the Scots variety of the Northumbrian or Northern English dialect. (Most highland Scots

¹ Thomas Fries, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), 36. "It is not surprising that those lowland Scotsmen who colonized the 'King's Plantation' in Ulster and whose descendants crossed the Atlantic and settled the Blue Ridge, the Appalachians, and the Ozarks should have been so little affected by the classical culture of the Renaissance."

at that time still spoke Gaelic.) This particular dialect would have been kept intact if the Scots had had no dealings with the Irish, and this, according to records, was the case.

While in Ulster the Scots multiplied, but after roughly 100 years they became dissatisfied with the trade and religious restrictions imposed by England, and numbers of them began emigrating to the English colonies in America.

Many of these Scots who now called themselves the "Scotch-Irish" came into Pennsylvania where, finding the better lands already settled by the English, they began to move south and west. "Their enterprise and pioneering spirit made them the most important element in the vigorous frontiersmen who opened up this part of the South and later other territories farther west into which they pushed."²

Besides the Scots who arrived from Ireland, more came directly from Scotland to America, particularly after "the '45", the final Jacobite uprising in support of "Bonnie Prince Charlie," the Young Pretender, which ended disastrously for the Scottish clans that supported him. By the time of the American Revolution there were about 50,000 Scots in this country.

But to get back to the dialect, let me quote two more linguistic authorities to prove my point about the Scottish influence on the local speech. Raven I. McDavid notes, "The speech of the hill people is quite different from both dialects of the Southern lowlands for it is basically derived from the Scotch-Irish of Western Pennsylvania."³ H. L. Mencken said of Appalachian folk speech, "The persons who speak it undiluted are often called by the Southern publicists, 'the purest Anglo-Saxons in the United States,' but less romantic ethnologists describe them as predominately Celtic in blood; though there has been a large infiltration of English and even German strains."⁴

The reason our people still speak as they do is that when these early Scots and English and Germans (and some Irish and Welsh too) came into the Appalachian area and settled, they virtually isolated themselves from the mainstream of American life for generations to come because of the hills and mountains, and so they kept the old speech forms that have long since fallen out of fashion elsewhere.

Things in our area are not always what they seem, linguistically speaking. Someone may tell you that "Cindy ain't got sense enough to come in outen the rain, but she sure is clever." *Clever*, you see, back in the 1600's meant "neighborly or accommodating." Also if you ask someone how he is, and he replies that he is "very well",

² Alfred C. Bough, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed., (New York, 1957), 409.

³ H. E. Shonston, *The American Language*, ed. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., the 4th ed. and the two supplements abridged, with annotations and new material. (New York, 1963), 455.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 410.

you are not necessarily to rejoice with him on the state of his health. Our people are accustomed to use a speech so vividly colorful and virile that his "very well" only means that he is feeling "so-so." If you are informed that "several" people came to a meeting, your informant does not mean what you do by *several*—he is using it in its older sense of anywhere from about 20 to 100 people. If you hear a person or an animal referred to as *ill*, that person or animal is not sick but bad-tempered, and this adjective has been so used since the 1300's. (Incidentally, good English used *sick* to refer to bad health long, long before our forebearers ever started saying *ill* for the same connotation.)

Many of our people refer to sour milk as *blinked* milk. This usage goes back at least to the early 1600's when people still believed in witches and the power of the evil eye. One of the meanings of the word *blink* back in those days was "to glance at;" if you glanced at something, you *blinked* at it, and thus sour milk came to be called *blinked* due to the evil machinations of the witch. There is another phrase that occurs from time to time, "Man, did he ever *feather into him!*" This used to carry a fairly murderous connotation, having gotten its start back in the days when the English long bow was the ultimate word in destructive power. Back then if you drew your bow with sufficient strength to cause your arrow to penetrate your enemy up to the feathers on its shaft, you had feathered into him. Nowadays, the expression has weakened in meaning until it merely indicates a bit of fisticuffs.

One of the most baffling expressions our people use (baffling to "furriners," at least) is "I don't care to. . . ." To outlanders this seems to mean a definite "no," whereas in truth it actually means, "thank you so much, I'd love to." One is forevermore hearing a tale of mutual bewilderment in which a gentleman driving an out-of-state car sees a young fellow standing alongside the road, thumbing. When the gentleman stops and asks if he wants a lift, the boy very properly replies, "I don't *keer* to," using *care* in the Elizabethan sense of the word. On hearing this, the man drives off considerably puzzled leaving an equally baffled young man behind. (Even the word *foreigner* itself is used here in its Elizabethan sense of someone who is the same nationality as the speaker, but not from the speaker's immediate home area.)

Reverend is generally used to address preachers, but it is a pretty versatile word, and full-strength whisky, or even the full-strength scent of skunk, are also called *reverend*. In these latter instances, its meaning has nothing to do with reverence, but with the fact that their strength is as the strength of ten because they are undiluted.

In the dialect, the word *allow* more often means "think, say, or suppose" than "permit." "He *lowed* he'd git it done tomorrow."

A neighbor may take you into her confidence and announce that she has heard that the preacher's daughter *should have been* running after the mailman. These are deep waters to the uninitiated. What she really means is that she has heard a juicy bit of gossip: the preacher's daughter is chasing the local mail carrier. However, she takes the precaution of using the phrase *should have been* to show that this statement is not vouched for by the speaker. The same phrase is used in the same way in the Paston Letters in the 1400's.

Almost all the so-called "bad English" used by natives of Appalachia was once employed by the highest ranking nobles of the realms of England and Scotland.

Few humans are really passionately interested in grammar so I'll skim as lightly over this section as possible, but let's consider the following bit of dialogue briefly: "I've been a-studying about how to say this, till I've nigh wearried myself to death. I reckon hit don't never do nobody no good to beat about the bush, so I'll just tell ye. Your man's hippoed. There's nothing ails him, but he spends more time using around the doctor's office than he does a-working."

The only criticism that even a linguistic purist might offer here is that, in the eighteenth century, *hippoed* was considered by some, Jonathan Swift among others, to be slangy even though it was used by the English society of the day. (To say someone is *hippoed* is to say he is a hypochondriac.)

Words like *a-studying* and *a-working* are verbal nouns and go back to Anglo-Saxon times; and from the 1300's on, people who *studied* about something, deliberated or reflected on it. *Nigh* is the old word for *near*, and *weary* was the pronunciation of *worry* in the 1300's and 1400's. The Scots also used this pronunciation. *Reckon* was current in Tudor England in the sense of *consider* or *suppose*. *Hit* is the Old English third person singular neuter pronoun for *it* and has come ringing down through the centuries for over a thousand years. All those multiple negatives were perfectly proper until some English mathematician in the eighteenth century decided that two negatives make a positive instead of simply intensifying the negative quality of some statement. Shakespeare loved to use them. *Ye* was once used accusatively, and *man* has been employed since early times to mean *husband*. And finally, *to use* means to frequent or loiter.

Certain grammatical forms occurring in the dialect have caused it to be regarded with pious horror by school marms. Prominent among the offenders, they would be almost sure to list these: "Bring them books over here." In the 1500's this was good English. "I found three bird's nestes on the way to school." This disyllabic ending for the plural goes back to the Middle Ages. "That pencil's not mine, it *her'n*." Possessive forms like *his'n*, *our'n*, *your'n* evolved in the Middle Ages on the model of *mine* and *thine*. In the

revision of the Wycliffe Bible, which appeared shortly after 1380, we find phrases such as ". . . restore to hir alle things that ben *hern*," and "some of *ourn* went in to the grave." "*He don't* scare me none." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *do* was used with *he*, *she*, and *it*. *Don't* is simply *do not*, of course. "*You wasn't* scared, *was you?*" During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many people were careful to distinguish between singular *you was* and plural *you were*. It became unfashionable in the early nineteenth century although Noah Webster stoutly defended it. "My brother *come* in from the army last night." This usage goes back to late Anglo-Saxon times. You find it in the Paston Letters and in Scottish poetry. "*I done finished* my lessons," also has many echoes in the Pastons' correspondence and the Scots poets. From the late Middle Ages on up the Northern dialect of English used formations like this: "guiltless persons is condemned," and so do our people. And finally, in times past, participial forms like these abounded: *has beat*, *has bore* with it, *has chose*. Preterite forms were as varied: *blowed*, *growed*, *catched*, and for *climbed* you can find *clum*, *clome*, *clim*! all of which are locally used.

Pronunciation of many words has changed considerably, too. *Deef* for *deaf*, *heered* for *heard*, *afearred* for *afraid*, *cowcumber* for *cucumber*, *bammy* for *balmy*, *holp* for *helped*, are a very few. Several distinct characteristics of the language of Elizabeth's day are still preserved. Words that had *oi* in them were given a long *i* pronunciation: *pizen*, *jine*, *bile*, *pint*, and so on. Words with *er* were frequently pronounced as if the letters were *ar*: *sarvice*, *sartin*, *narvous*. It is from this time that we get our pronunciation of *sergeant* and the word *varsity* which is a clipping of the word *university* given the *ar* sound. Another Elizabethan characteristic was the substitution of an *i* sound for an *e* sound. You hear this tendency today when people say *miny* *kittle*, *Chist*, *git*, and so on. It has caused such confusion with the words *pen* and *pin* (which our people pronounce alike as *pin*) that they are regularly accompanied by a qualifying word—*stick pin* for the pin and *pin* and *ink pin* for the pen.

You can hear many characteristic Scottish pronunciations. *Whar*, *thar*, *dar* (*where*, *there*, and *dare*) are typical. So also are *poosh*, *boosh*, *eetch*, *deesh*, (*push*, *bush*, *itch*, *dish* and *fish*.)

In some ways this vintage English reflects the outlook and spirit of the people who speak it; and, we find that not only is the language Elizabethan, but that some of the ways these people look at things are Elizabethan too. Many other superstitions still exist here. In some homes, when a death occurs all the mirrors and pictures are turned to the wall. Now I don't know if today the people still know why they do this, or if they just go through the actions because it's the thing to do, but this belief goes far back in history. It was once thought that the mirror reflected the soul of the person looking into it and if the soul of the dead person saw

the soul of one of his beloved relatives reflected in the mirror, he might take it with him, so his relatives were taking no chances.

The belief that if a bird accidentally flies into a house, a member of the household will die, is also very old, and is still current in the region. Cedar trees are in a good deal of disfavor in Lincoln County, and the reason seems to stem from the conviction held by a number of people that if someone plants a cedar he will die when it grows large enough to shade his coffin.

Aside from its antiquity, the most outstanding feature of the dialect is its masculine flavor—robust and virile. This is a language spoken by a red-blooded people who have colorful phraseology born in their bones. They tend to call a spade a spade in no uncertain terms. "No, the baby didn't come early, the weddin' came late," remarked one proud grandpa. Such people have small patience with the pallid descriptive limitations of standard English. They are not about to be put off with the rather insipid remark, "My, it's hot!" or, "isn't it cold out today?" They want to know just how hot or cold: "It's hotter 'n the hinges of hell" or "Hit's blue cold out thar!" Other common descriptive phrases for cold are (freely translated) "It's colder 'n a witch's bosom" or it's colder 'n a well-digger's backside."

Speakers of Southern mountain dialect are past masters of the art of coining vivid descriptions. Their everyday conversation is liberally sprinkled with such gems as: "That man is so contrary, if you throwed him in a river he'd float upstream!" "She walks so slow they have to set stakes to see if she's a-movin!" "Thet pore boy's an awkward size—too big for a man and not big enough for a horse." "Zeke, he come bustin' outta thar and hit it for the road quick as double-gear'd lightenin'!"

Nudity is frowned upon in Appalachia, but for some reason there are numerous "nekkid as. ." phrases. Any casual sampling would probably contain these three: "Nekkid as a jaybird," "bare-nekkid as a hound dog's rump," and "start nekkid." Start-nekkid comes directly from the Anglo-Saxons, so it's been around for more than a thousand years. Originally "Start" was *steort* which meant "tail." Hence, if you were "start-nekkid," you were "nekkid to the tail." A similar phrase, "stark-naked" is a Johnny-come-lately, not even appearing in print until around 1530.

If a lady tends to be gossipy, her friends may say that "her tongue's a mile long," or else that it "wags at both ends." Such ladies are a great trial to young dating couples. Incidentally, there is a formal terminology to indicate exactly how serious the intentions of these couples are, ranging from *sparkin'* which is simply dating, to *courtin'* which is dating with a more serious intent, on up to *talkin'*, which means the couple is seriously contemplating matrimony. Shakespeare was talking in this sense in *King Lear*.

If a man has imbibed too much of who-shot-John, his neighbor may describe him as "so drunk he couldn't hit the ground with his hat," or, on the morning-after, the sufferer may admit that "I was so dang dizzy I had to hold on to the grass afore I could lean ag'in the ground."

One farmer was having a lot of trouble with a weasel killing his chickens. "He jest grabs 'em before they can git word to God," he complained.

Someone who has a disheveled or bedraggled appearance may be described in any one of several ways: "You look like you've been chewed up and spit out," or "you look like you've been a-sortin wildcats," or "you look like the hindquarters of hard luck," or, simply, "you look like somethin the cat drug in that the dog wouldn't eat!"

"My belly thinks my throat is cut" means "I'm hungry," and seems to have a venerable history of several hundred years. I found a citation for it dated in the early 1500's.

A man may be "bad to drink" or "wicked to swear", but these descriptive adjectives are never reversed.

You ought not to be shocked if you hear a saintly looking grandmother admit she likes to hear a coarse-talking man; she means a man with a deep bass voice. (this can also refer to a singing voice, and in this case, if grandma prefers a tenor, she'd talk about someone who sings "Shallow.") Nor ought you to leap to the conclusion that a "Hard girl" is one who lacks the finer feminine sensibilities. "Hard" is the dialectal pronunciation of *hired* and seems to stem from the same source as do "far" engines that run on rubber "tars."

This language is vivid and virile, but so was Elizabethan English. However, some of the things you say may be shocking the folk as much as their combined lexicons may be shocking you. For instance, in the stratum of society in which I was raised, it was considered acceptable for a lady to say either "damn" or "hell" if strongly moved. Most Appalachian ladies would rather be caught dead than uttering either of these words, but they are pretty free with their use of a four letter word for manure which I don't use. I have heard it described as everything from bug _____ to bull _____. Some families employ another of these four letter words for manure as a pet name for the children, and seem to have no idea that it is considered indelicate in other areas of the country.

Along with a propensity for calling a spade a spade, the dialect has a strange mid-victorian streak in it too. Until recently, it was considered brash to use either the word *bull* or *stallion*. If it was necessary to refer to a bull, he was known variously as a "father cow" or a "gentleman cow" or an "ox" or a "mas-cu-line," while

a stallion was either a "stable horse" or else rather ominously, "The animal."

Only *wasps* fly around Lincoln County, I don't think I've ever heard of a *wasp* there, and I've never been able to trace the reason for that usage, but I do know why *cockleburrs* are called *cuckleburrs*. The first part of the word *cocklebur* carries an objectionable connotation to the folk. However, if they are going to balk at that, it seems rather hilarious to me that they find nothing objectionable about *cuckle*.

A friend of mine who has a beauty parlor now, used to have a small store on the banks of the Guyan River. She told me about a little old lady who trotted into the store one day with a request for "some of the *strumpet candy*." My friend said she was very sorry, they didn't have any. But, she added gamely, what kind was it, and she would try to order some. The little lady glanced around to see if she could be overheard, lowered her voice and said, "well, it's *horehound*, but I don't like to use that word!"

The dialect today is a watered down thing compared to what it was a generation ago, but our people are still the best talkers in the world, and I think we should listen to them with more appreciation.